

**Foreign Recipes: Mothers, Daughters and Food in *The Joy Luck Club*, *A Chorus of Mushrooms* and *Like Water For Chocolate***

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**Abstract**

The following article will discuss the representation of food, eating and cooking in the context of fiction that focuses on the relationship between mothers and daughters by taking a closer look at the beginnings of contemporary ‘food-literature’ by female authors. By focusing on fictional texts published before ‘food-literature’ turned into a mainstream sub-genre, this article will critically consider the various themes and ideas this type of literature introduced to the debate surrounding literary representation of gender and sexuality. Whilst the three texts differ in narrative structure and content, they share a specific preoccupation with food, cooking and eating which is linked textually and thematically to the relationships between mothers and daughters and the experience of cultural diaspora. The investigation will focus on the literary and formal modes that interconnect these themes, in particular when asking if food, cooking and eating should have a ‘special’ place in women’s writing, as it has been argued in recent publications exploring food and eating as a theme in women’s literature.

*Keywords:* Amy Tan, Laura Esquivel, Hiromi Goto, food, identity, gender, diaspora.

Food is at the centre of life and our everyday existence. Its consumption is as ordinary as it is fundamental to our bodies and the culture in which we live and participate. Starting with the fairy tales we consume as infants, literature is saturated with images of food, its overabundance as well as its painfully felt absence. In recent years, however, matters of the culinary have gained a more central relevance for and in literary texts. When perusing the shelves of contemporary literature in bookshops one is forcefully reminded of the various meanings of consuming in its relation to eating, reading and purchasing. Furthermore, whilst the trend to 'food-literature' is certainly not exclusive to female authors, there is a noteworthy tendency in contemporary writing by women to use food and eating as specific tropes when writing about historical, social and political issues. Sarah Sceats in *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2000) points out that there is a special relationship between femininity and food, because traditionally it is still mainly women who take care of the provision and cooking of meals. However, she argues,

women eat as well as cook, starve as well as serve, and contemporary fiction is as much concerned with women's appetites as their nurturing capacities. ... women's writing manifests far more diverse areas of engagement than such basic explanations suggest, ranging from explorations of female culinary sensuousness, creativity and authority in cooking, to the exercise of power or political responsibility through food and acts of eating, to the revisiting of earlier depictions of women's sexuality through appetite and eating, from Genesis onwards (Sceats 2000: 2).

According to Sceats, food, eating and cooking, function as a means of exchange and take on the role of a universal signifier, particularly so in and for contemporary's women's writing. Susanne Skubal (2002) in her book *Word of Mouth*, similarly, reads food as a unique signifier when she argues that 'food is a language that we speak, for the most part unwittingly' (Skubal 2002: 45). Whilst Skubal does not focus exclusively on women's writing in her exploration of food in relation to literature and language, the feminine, and here especially the maternal, is central to her investigation. Sceats and Skubal look at theorists in psychoanalysis such as Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein and Julia Kristeva when they argue that culinary issues are ineludibly linked to concepts and constructions of femininity and female sexuality. Eating in general, and the preparation and consumption of food in particular, are in both publications linked to moments of the radical and subversive, a connection that is seen as caused by its proximity to femininity and the female. As Skubal points out when discussing the problem of eating disorders:

Underwriting the entire category of disordered eating is the assumption that eating, like other culturally controlled acts ought to be "ordered". But unlike the bulk of culturally and psychically ordered things, eating is in some fundamental way outside the Symbolic order to begin with, primitively and irrepressibly the mark of the pre-genital, of the maternal (Skubal 2002: 68).

By regarding food as situated outside the Symbolic, Skubal attempts to navigate the discussion of eating disorders such as anorexia out of the patriarchal sphere of hierarchical thinking. For her, laws of culture cannot control matters of food and eating, which are situated in the realms beyond the symbolic. However by doing so, her

argument banishes discourses of eating and with it the maternal and femininity from the symbolic and from culture. This move is directly complicit with the phallogocentric binary construction regulating the relationship between nature and culture, a structure that is mirrored in the relationship between male/female and masculine/feminine. This is rather peculiar since Skubal suggested earlier that it

might be said that all culture passes through the mouth. Food – its production and preparation, its distribution, its consumption – still comprises the central economy of life. There are no more elaborate social rituals than those associated with eating (Skubal 2002: 43).

Here, food and its consumption is defined not only as part of the cultural sphere, when passing through the mouth and the body, eating is imagined as injecting culture into the corporeal which, via the act of ingesting, is demarcated as the locus of culture itself. Thus, rather than positioning eating outside the symbolic, its correlation to the cultural sphere could be understood as being regulated and maintained via extimacy, a process that complicates the relationship between inside and outside. Extimacy links the interior and exterior like a Moebius strip which means, as Jacques-Alain Miller explains, that the ‘most intimate is at the same time the most hidden. ... The most intimate is not the point of transparency but rather a point of opacity. ... Extimacy says that the intimate is Other – like a foreign body, a parasite’ (Miller 1988: 123).

Whilst Skubal’s categorisation of eating as outside the laws of culture runs the risk of falling back into an overly simplistic binarity, her view of eating as pre-symbolic

nevertheless alerts us to one of the most complex and confusing issues in relation to food: the way it muddies the waters between natural and cultural. However, rather than attempting to find the proper dividing line between nature and culture, the complexities and complications surrounding food and eating could be read as a problematisation of this very binarity. In this respect the processes of ingestion and digestion particularly in the ways in which they are refracted in literature are always much more than ‘a specific mode of communication to the reader’ (Sceats 2000: 184). Citing Lévi-Strauss’s adage that food is good to think with, Elspeth Probyn revises the idea of food as a transcendental signifier when she argues,

Eating refracts who we are. Food/body/eating assemblages reveal the ways in which identity has become elementary, and that its composite elements are always in movement. As alimentary assemblages, eating recalls with force the elemental nature of class, gender, sexuality and nation. But beyond these monumental categories, eating places different orders of things and ways of being alongside each other, inside and outside inextricably linked. ... Now beyond a model of inside and out, we are alimentary assemblages, bodies that eat with vigorous class, ethnic and gendered appetites, mouth machines that ingest and regurgitate, articulating what we are, what we eat and what eats us (Probyn 2000: 32).

Thus rather than understanding food, eating and digestive processes as metaphors through which we can access texts, it might be more beneficial from a literary theoretical perspective to view texts as infected by the complexities underlying the

culinary tropes and images they employ. The very meaning and procedure of ingestion and digestion relies on, and simultaneously results in, the blurring of boundaries and spatial categories; eating, it seems, always participates in some act of contagion that brings into contact areas that are traditionally perceived as separate from each other. Any attempt to ‘use’ eating and food as tropes will therefore amplify the infectious or parasitic effect on the text that wants to incorporate them metaphorically. In ‘Limited Inc’ Derrida (1988) refers to the parasite as something that is

by definition never simply *external*, never simply something that can be excluded from or kept outside of the body “proper”, shut out from the “familial” table or house... The parasite then ‘takes place’. And at bottom, whatever violently ‘takes place’ or occupies a site is always *something* of a parasite. *Never quite* taking place is thus part of its performance, of its success as an event, of its taking place (Derrida 1988: 90).

Discussing Derrida’s notion of the parasitic, Nicholas Royle (1995) elaborates on its spatial ambiguity when he points out that

the parasite both belongs and does not belong to what it inhabits, its ‘own’ identity is of a different order, being at once *para* (‘beside’) and *non-para*, inside and outside, coming to figure what is at once the same as and different from itself. (Royle 1995: 147).

In literature, I want to suggest, rather than being used ‘to explore and convey philosophical, psychological, moral and political concerns’ (Sceats 2000: 18), food and eating ‘take place’ in the violating and disruptive sense that Derrida assigns to the workings of the parasite. When incorporated into the text, food and eating refuse assimilation and act as foreign bodies that infect texts with the very same moment of

self- alienation and internal alterity that complicates the way they make sense in and as frameworks of culture. With these reflections in mind, it will be interesting to return to the initial question why food and eating should have found such a privileged place in contemporary writing by women.

The relationship of women's writing to the kitchen and the dining room is often ambiguous and rarely uncomplicated. To a certain extent food as a theme and motif in women's literature leads the reader immediately into the sphere of gender and sexuality. However, it would be foolish to suggest that it is only in women's literature where the connection between the culinary, gender and sexuality is interrogated and debated. As Susanne Skubal suggests in her discussion of Marcel Proust's legendary *Madeleines*, as soon as we are in the sphere of eating we are dealing with the oral which itself is inextricably linked with the discourse of the mother:

The explicit pre-occupation with the oral in *Remembrance of Things Past* – the ubiquitous madeleine, the kisses managed and missed, the moth eaten notebooks, the invalids thin fare, the dinner parties and luncheons – is bound to Proust's meditation on memory implicitly and to the maternal inevitably (Skubal 2002: 20).

Eating and food are in a variety of manners intertwined with the sphere of the maternal and are thus always haunted by the ghost of the mother, or as Skubal puts it in relation to Proust: 'we can taste the ma in the madeleine' (Skubal, 2002, p. 21). Because of this implicit presence of the mother, food very often functions as a gender specific trope in women's literature. Whilst eating and food do feature in texts by male authors, they are rarely linked directly to *men's* experience of sexuality and gender. In contrast, the alimentary and culinary in texts by female authors very often encourages readings

and interpretations that link food and eating directly to the sphere of the feminine, which then tends to push the texts into the category of *women's literature*. Furthermore, as current publications on the subject demonstrate, the combination of the signifiers 'woman', 'food' and 'writing' are reproductive of each other and the very meanings underlying them. Sceats, for example, introduces the tenet of her book as an argument for

the centrality and versatility of food and eating in women's writing. Not only does the action of the novels examined often occur through food preparation and eating, or through oral and alimentary preoccupation of one sort or another, food and eating themselves convey much of the meanings of the novels. This results from diverse factors such ... deep associations between food and the psyche, specific socio-cultural pressures, especially on women's bodies, cultural and artistic inscriptions, and from the fact that food and its activities offer multiple possibilities for expression and action (Sceats 2000: 8).

The phrase 'especially women's bodies' suggests that in women's literature food and eating will always function, directly or more subtly, as tropes for femininity and the female. Writing by men, the passage seems to imply, is not marked by such specificities. Sceats' observation that the relationship between eating, food and the female body is of special interest is indisputable. Eating, as Maud Ellmann argues, 'was traditionally seen as an unseemly and regrettable necessity for women' (Ellmann 1993: 8) and the open mouth of a woman has always seemed too close for comfort and as a signifier impinged on constructions of femininity in an abject manner. Food, its ingestion, digestion and the concurrent corporeal effects of these acts are different for men and women, and it is the



ghost of the maternal that can claim responsibility for this discrimination. Hillel Schwartz (1986) argues in relation to the gender specifics of obesity:

Yet when men turned their eyes on overweight women, they made of women's dieting a fulsome and patent ritual. Since women's weights seemed to jump at puberty, marriage, pregnancy and menopause, women's reducing had to be spoken of in terms of fluids, internal secretions and sexual ichor, as if womb and stomach were identical twins. ... Where fat men inspire of terrify, fat women draw the camphor of sympathy and disgust – sympathy, because they cannot help themselves; disgust, because they are sexually ambiguous, emotionally sloppy (Schwartz 1986: 17-18).

Food appears to affect the female body by immediately gendering and sexualising it in a specific manner as suggested by the image of stomach conflated into a womb. The body of the pregnant and lactating woman and the taboos surrounding it are therefore always related to sexuality *and* eating since they function as an unconscious reminder of the sexual act as well as bringing to the fore cultural anxieties about cannibalism. If womb and stomach can be interchanged in the female body, the swollen abdomen can be a sign of the creation of life *and* the violation of one of the oldest taboos: the eating of human flesh. Whilst eating disorders do not exempt male bodies, it is in particular the images of the female obese or emaciated body that unnerve cultural sensibility and trigger feelings of disgust and abjection and a sense of the grotesque. This 'special' sexualising and gendering effect of food and eating leaves its trace on sexual as well as textual bodies and, as I will argue when discussing the fictional works, on the discursive structure of literary texts that approach femininity via the culinary.

If concepts of femininity and female sexuality are influenced and ‘infected’ by the processes underlying ingestion and digestion, one could suggest that this would also have a direct effect on the relationship between women and writing in texts that are preoccupied with the subject of food. Is there something intrinsically gender specific in literature by women that revolves around tropes, images and themes based on food and eating? Furthermore, can this question be approached in a framework that will not put it automatically into the proximity of an essentialism based on a reductive, foundationalist view of femininity and female sexuality? Rather than viewing the relationship between eating and femininity as something that will affirm the meaning of woman, is it feasible that the concept of a given subjectivity is devoured by the very processes that are employed to gain access to a stable and fixed identity? Judith Butler (1990) asks these questions in a more general and abstract sense when she explores the relationship between signification processes and identity:

If identity is asserted through a process of signification, if identity is always already signified, and yet continues to signify as it circulates within various interlocking discourses, then the question of agency is not to be answered through recourse to an “I” that preexists signification. In other words, the enabling questions for an assertion of “I” are provided by the structure of signification, the rules that regulate the legitimate and illegitimate invocation of that pronoun, the practices that establish the terms of intelligibility by which that pronoun can circulate (Butler 1990: 143).

When looking at the three examples of women's writing on food and the processes underlying them, the focus will therefore be on the ways in which women (and femininity) are consuming texts/food and, at the same time, are consumed by them.

Published in 1989, Laura Esquivel's debut novel *Like Water for Chocolate* (1993) was an over-night success and gained much acclaim from critics as well as from the reading public. To a certain extent, the book can be described as a trendsetter when it comes to the genre of 'food literature', a genre that would evolve in full force from the 1990s onwards. The 1993 English translation of the novel comments on its back cover on its 'simmering sensuality' and praises it as a book that will be savoured and craved, as 'an adventure in the kitchen' that 'serves up the full helping' and thus sets the tone for a genre where food is subject as much as metaphor. *Like Water for Chocolate* inaugurated the food inspired lingua that from now on would become *de rigueur* when literary works on food and eating were reviewed in the literary supplements of newspapers and magazines. The book tells the story of the De la Garza family in revolutionary Mexico, focusing in particular on the daughter Tita and her unfulfilled love relationship with Pedro. Tita, as the youngest daughter, has to obey Mexican tradition and stay unmarried to look after her mother, Mama Elena. Pedro, as a last resort to stay close to Tita, marries her sister Rosaura, a union also championed by the suspicious Mama Elena who wants to make sure that Tita will comply with the fate that tradition has allocated her. For more than twenty years Tita and Pedro will be unable to love for each other, they will be separated for long times and by long distances until they are finally united in passion only to die of the sexual ecstasy that proves too powerful for their mortal bodies. What grants the story its particular narrative and discursive *frisson* though, is the way it unfolds in relation to cooking and eating. Divided into twelve chapters, the text is based

on an annual chronology from January to December. Furthermore, each chapter commences with a recipe for a dish which will be of major importance for the narrative, its characters and the overall development of the story. Tita and Pedro's fate is thus embedded in the preparation and consumption of food, mainly traditional Mexican dishes, which, as the granddaughter of Rosaura and the narrator of the story explains in the final chapter, was all that was left of their lives:

When Esperanza, my mother, returned from her wedding trip, all that she found under the remains of what had been the ranch was this cookbook, which she bequeathed to me when she died, and which tells in each of its recipes this story of a love interred (Esquivel 1993: 221)

The book the reader has been consuming is thus retrospectively categorised as being part of the genre of cookbooks. As a collection of recipes, the story is linked even closer to the culinary domain which transfers the location of the love story from the bedroom to the kitchen. This shifting of boundaries, the blurring of discrete categories and a general sense of the unpredictable runs like a thread through the novel and has a direct bearing on the directions into which the narrative and its characters evolve. Furthermore, written in the style of magic realism with its ventures into the fantastical, emphasis of the sensual, overabundance of imagery, direct references to the sphere of sexuality and the unconscious, distortions of time, and references to the oral tradition, the novel always works on the margins of plausibility and thus questions a stable notion of the real. Uncertainty and instability are further emphasised and put to the fore by the thematic focus on food, its cooking and consumption, which are then developed as the narrative's main subject and formal device, as Kristine Ibsen (1995) points out:

Food functions as a narrative device in the novel: like a cinematic montage, bridging both temporal and spatial displacements, it transports both the characters and the reader into a sensual dimension of reality. ... Esquivel ... approaches the subject playfully, as Tita compares her emotional and physical state in terms of ludicrous culinary metaphors that question both the “seriousness” of canonized discourse and the timeworn metaphors of popular literature... Clearly, then, the novel’s culinary metaphors suggest an approach to reality that emphasizes what is tangible over what is abstract and theoretical (Ibsen 1995: 138-139).

Ibsen’s discussion of *Like Water for Chocolate* is above all interested in its parodic character, especially in relation to the tradition of a more mainstream magic realism as, for example, represented by García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. She argues that whereas Márquez’s novel focuses on a re-examination of historical trends,

Esquivel’s work produces a meaning independent from the original text by concentrating on the individual experience in relation to history: rather than emphasizing issues of sexual domination and violence upon which the Americas were founded, Esquivel “feminizes” her novel through the exaggeration of traits traditionally associated with women such as irrationality and sensitivity (Ibsen 1995: 135).

For Ibsen, the achievement of *Like Water for Chocolate* lies in its successful attempt to challenge canonical literature by forcing it to take into account marginalized and excluded literary discourses resulting in a displacement of ‘aesthetic hierarchies and generic categories’(Ibsen 1995: 143). Furthermore, by dissolving ‘the borders between canonized and popular literatures, between oral and written discourses, the hierarchy governing such distinctions is subverted as well.’ (Ibsen 1995: 143).

Ibsen points out that her reading of Esquivel’s novel is mainly concerned with the aspect of parody, a choice of focus that will evidently impinge on her evaluation of the role and relevance of food and eating. Whilst she mentions the aspect of food, the culinary as such is not a main point of reference when she discusses *how* the text subverts existing boundaries and hierarchies. Furthermore, whilst she regards the novel as radical in its formal structure as well as in its relationship to its readers, there is tendency to cling on to a framework of binary oppositions in her interpretation. There are many instances in her article when she talks of ‘real women’ versus literary representations of femininity, the tangible versus the abstract and theoretical, the historical versus personal experience. Operating in a paradigm that relies on such clear distinctions and binarities somewhat undermines her argument and often reinforces the sense of discrete categories, in terms of gender as well as of genre. Focusing on food and cooking, and the way in which they are integrated into and at the same time disrupt the narrative and the presentation and construction of identities, I want to suggest, encourages a different reading, one that questions the existence of clear-cut boundaries and might thus offer a more radical re-appropriation of the magic in magic realism.

In 'Foodmaking as a Thoughtful Practice' Lisa M. Heldke asks what would have happened to philosophy had Plato regarded 'the preparation of food as a central source of philosophical insight' (Heldke 1992: 203). She argues that

had subsequent philosophers continued to attend to such activities as growing and cooking food, it is likely that the theory/practice dichotomy, which threads its way through much of western philosophy, would not have developed as it did. Foodmaking, rather than drawing us to make a sharp distinction between mental and manual labour, or between theoretical and practical work, tends to invite us to see itself as a "mentally manual" activity, a "theoretically practical" activity – a "thoughtful practice" (Heldke 1992: 203).

Esquivel's novel can be read as a literary example that speculates in a similar vein on the relationship between philosophy and food making, and by doing so promulgates a notion of cooking and the kitchen that allows them to be viewed and understood in a much more radical way than they traditionally are. Whilst the novel is set in a mainly feminine environment, there is no sense of a functioning women's community or sisterhood. The most surprising aspect of the text, and incidentally also the case for *The Joy Luck Club* (1994) and *A Chorus of Mushrooms* (1997), is the state of war between many of the female characters, and here in particular mothers and daughters. Mama Elena practices a matriarchy based on a model of hierarchical patriarchy: only her opinion counts, no decision can be questioned, her daughters, and in particular Tita, are treated like servants, if not slaves. Her behaviour is put into context when, after her death, Tita discovers that her mother was passionately in love with a man she was not allowed to marry. However, even when it is revealed that she disobeyed

convention and resumed sexual relations with her lover (an escaped slave from America) when still married to her husband, Mama Elena remains a rather reviled character throughout the narrative. Her lover was killed before she could elope with him and leaves Mama Elena in a loveless marriage and pregnant with his child, Gertrudis. Gertrudis eventually causes the death of her mother's husband who dies of a heart attack when rumour of the identity of Gertrudis' real father reaches him. Furthermore, after consuming Tita's Quail in Rose Petal Sauce, Gertrudis runs off with one of the revolutionaries and later lives in a brothel since she is utterly consumed by a sexual arousal that no single man can satisfy. Tita's discovery of the similarity between her mother's fate and her own and the identity of Gertrudis biological provenance does not result in forgiveness, though. The brutality of her mother's treatment and the effect it has been having on Tita's life is of major importance for the development of the narrative discourse. Even at her mother's funeral, Tita is unable to forgive and she can only exonerate Mama Elena's behaviour by dividing her retrospectively into a good and a bad mother:

During the funeral, Tita really wept for her mother. Not for the castrating mother who had repressed Tita her entire life, but for the person who had lived a frustrated love. And she swore in front of Mama Elena's tomb that come what may, she would never renounce that love (Esquivel 1993: 126).

This concept of the divided mother harks back to Klein's depressive position where infants experience guilt about the destructive impulses and phantasies that are directed against the primal object, the mother, and, at an even earlier stage, against the maternal breast. Changing between persecutor and loved object, the figure of the mother



emerges here as divided, similar to her appearance in folklore and oral tradition in which she is traditionally presented in the dual roles of loving mother and witch who wants to harm the daughter. The co-existence of these two models of the maternal emerges in the novel via cooking and eating. Tita, a child prodigy in the kitchen, is also a child of the kitchen, since, rather than nursed by her mother whose milk dried up because of the shock over the husband's death, the cook becomes her substitute mother who feeds her and trains her in the art of cooking. Eventually Tita's culinary ability succeeds that of a skilled chef, because her unconscious emotions impact directly onto the food she is preparing. Furthermore, this osmotic transference will also affect everybody who consumes her food. Food, its preparation, consumption, the mixing of ingredients, do not strictly work as straightforward similes in the novel. It is not that Tita is *like* the food she prepares and feeds to her family; food and the culinary rather than providing a purely identificatory mirror for Tita, function in the novel as a paradigm that in a 'theoretically practical' way offers a radical rethinking of agency and identity. Similar to food, which is always in a process of becoming and cannot be traced back to an original state, any notion of subjectivity in the novel is always one of being in a process of osmosis, in lieu of a better term. As a child, Tita developed a sixth sense

about everything concerning food. Her eating habits, for example, were attuned to the kitchen routine: in the morning, when she could smell that the beans were ready; at midday, when she sensed the water was ready for plucking the chickens; and in the afternoon, when the dinner bread was baking, Tita knew it was time for her to be fed (Esquivel 1993: 1).

Mama Elena causes her own death by continuously overdosing on emetic medicine because she suspects Tita of poisoning her cooking. Rather than giving up the illusion of agency, Mama Elena extricates herself from this process of 'becoming' by literally vomiting herself to death. The milk she never had for Tita returns in overabundance as vomit and as an inability to digest Tita's alternative model of being which questions the idea of authority and hierarchical logic. After having alienated all servants, it is Tita in her role as the dutiful daughter who stays with her and looks after her. To a certain extent, this leads to a reversal of roles where Tita acts like the sensible mother who tries to feed a rebellious infant rejecting her meals:

After that, there was nothing Mama Elena could do except eat what Tita cooked, but she took any possible precaution about it. Besides insisting that Tita taste the food in front of her, she always had a glass of milk brought to her with her meals, and she would drink that before eating the food, to counteract the effects of the bitter poison that according to her was dissolved in the food. Sometimes these measures alone sufficed, but occasionally she felt sharp pains in her belly, and then she took, in addition, a swig of syrup of *ipecac* and another of squill of onion as a purgative.( Esquivel 1993: 123).

Finally, it is the self-administration of the purgative that will kill her (a taste of her own medicine, so to speak) and, ironically, Tita's obedience to her mother. Rather than refusing to fulfil the role her mother has chosen for her, she is heeding her mother's exact words: 'You know perfectly well that being the youngest daughter means you have to take care of me until the day I die' (Esquivel 1993: 14). By refusing Tita's food, Mama Elena not only brings about her own death, her demise is also directly linked to

her failure of accepting a self that is defined by ambiguity. Her reluctance to swallow can be read as a general unwillingness to participate in a 'culinary philosophy' based on interconnectedness and which questions a binary distinction between subject and object. As Heldke argues, it is exactly their ability to interconnect that allows foodmaking activities to 'challenge the sharp subject/object dichotomy that characterizes traditional inquiry, and that serves to separate such head work from hand work. Preparing food encourages us to blur the separation between ourselves and our food ...' (Heldke 1992: 217). The text thus creates a direct philosophical relationship between Mama Elena's death and her non-participation in cooking and eating.

Eating and cooking, in particular as demonstrated in the fate of Tita, are often dangerous acts determined by a contradictory nature that can make them wholesome *as well as* detrimental to bodily health, and it is this rather complex and ambiguous notion of the culinary and of identity that Mama Elena rejects when she chooses to vomit rather than swallow. Food as *pharmakon*, as something that can kill *and* cure, functions as the contradictory centre of *Like Water for Chocolate* and as a powerful formal and narrative device that affects the performance of identities. Elena (mother) and Tita (daughter) are the same *and* different; Mama Elena dies *because* Tita is doing her duty and feeding her; Pedro marries Rosaura *because* he loves Tita; John gives up Tita *because* he loves her. By focusing on the processes that underlie cooking and eating, the often anarchic effects they have on separate spheres, boundaries and the relationship between centre and margin, the novel, rather than *using* the culinary as metaphor, plays with the concepts of traditional logic and often reverses the rules governing cause and effect. By doing so, it comments pertinently on the complex ways in which food functions as metaphor and the way in which identity is only intelligible as the effect of narrative forces. Discursively

structured by the deconstructive mechanisms of magic realism, cooking and eating emerge as an all-encompassing textual economy that de-regulates what is traditionally regarded as normal. When preparing the cake for the wedding between her sister and her lover, for example, Tita, overcome by sadness, cries into the batter with the effect that all wedding guests will share her tears. They, furthermore, will succumb to terrible nausea and vomiting which will prevent Pedro and Rosaura to consummate their nuptials. However, eating does not have the same effect on each person: whereas the dish works for Gertrudis and Pedro as an aphrodisiac, it makes Rosaura feel nauseous and sick. Thus, eating, in addition to something we do, the text seems to suggest, does something to us and the effect is more often than not unpredictable because consuming food impacts in a very direct manner on what is regarded as normal and real. When Tita and Pedro can finally consummate their passion for each other, a month after Mama Elena's death, it is ironically, the spectral presence of the latter that helps them to conceal their illicit affair. Because of the heat of their desire, plumes 'of phosphorescent colours were ascending to the sky like delicate Bengal lights' (Esquivel 1993: 144). This phenomenon, however, is interpreted by the other members of the household as the presence of Mama Elena's ghost:

If poor Mama Elena had known that even after she was dead her presence was enough to inspire terror – and that this fear of encountering her is what provided Tita and Pedro with the perfect opportunity to profane her favourite place with impunity, rolling voluptuously on Gertrudis' bed – she would have died another hundred times over (Esquivel 1993: 145).

It is thus via her daughter's disobedience that her mother is resurrected. Going against the maternal will, Tita's act refers back to Mama Elena's own extra marital affair and the consequences it had on her family, in particular her daughters. This link between mother and daughter as determined by an oscillation between sameness and difference evolves as one of the major themes in the novel and is somewhat typical of this genre of fictional texts. *The Joy Luck Club* (1994) and *A Chorus of Mushrooms* (1997), although narratively and thematically dissimilar to *Like Water for Chocolate* and each other, share many of its discursive elements in particular where food, eating and the relationship between mothers and daughters are concerned.

Amy Tan's and Hiromi Goto's novels are both situated in a cross-cultural and cross-generational setting, *The Joy Luck Club* (1994) referring to the lives of first and second generation immigrants from China, *A Chorus of Mushrooms* (1997) focusing on the relationship between a Japanese grandmother, mother and daughter who emigrated to Canada. Tan's novel, first published in 1989, not only topped the bestseller lists of many western countries but also subsequently triggered off the publication of many similar semi-biographical narratives about women in China. Goto's narrative, published five years later in 1994, is to a certain extent part of this trend. Both texts share a proclivity to the oral, a fragmented and often disjointed structure that emphasises a self-referential foregrounding of the narrative and reading process, a notion that is further enforced by the inclusion of fairy tales, dreams and the fantastic in general. Each of these aspects can be related directly to the centrality of food, eating and cooking which play a pivotal role in the ways in which the texts problematise concepts of national and cultural identity and the complex relationship between mothers and daughters. In Goto's novel the narrative voice is shared between Naoe (the grandmother) and Murasaki/Muriel (the

granddaughter) leaving Keiko (the mother) silent which means the mother as such only comes into being as the effect of the narrative. Being always under construction, the mother is what *A Chorus of Mushrooms* is about, but, by barring her from a direct narrative presence, the text also questions the mother as a self-identical entity. This non-identity of the maternal is in the text directly related to food and eating in the accounts of Naoe and Murasaki:

Keiko. My daughter who has forsaken identity. Forsaken! So biblical, but it suits her, my little convert. Converted from rice and *daikon* to wieners and beans. Endless evenings of tedious roast chicken and honey smoked ham and overdone rump roast. My daughter, you were raised on fish cakes and pickled plums. This Western food has changed you and you've grown more opaque even as your heart has brittle. Silver-edged and thin as paper. I love you still. You are my daughter, after all, and this you cannot change. For all that you call me Obāchan and treat me as a child. I am not your grandmother. I am your mother (Goto 1997: 13).

Because the mother is never literally present, her position emerges here as a slippery notion that can only come into being in a contextual manner. As soon as they have arrived in Canada, Naoe loses her position as a mother to Keiko by becoming grandmother *and* child to her. On the other hand, Keiko herself cannot claim the maternal position since she is not given a voice in the narrative. Naoe connects the loss of her daughter to the consumption of Western food which, according to her, has given her a 'ketchup brain' (Goto 1997: 13). Murasaki, whose narrative position in the novel is located in the past ( reminiscing about her childhood), and in the present

(sharing these memories with her lover), is on a quest to find her place in relation to the matrilineal line of her family and to her cultural and national identity: 'The daughter of a daughter of a daughter of a daughter of a daughter of a daughter of ... the list is endless. But I am here.' (Goto 1997: 52). But it is not at all clear where 'here' is, and instead of confirming the notion of a fixed presence, the text with its constant changes between narrative positions, places and times, is obscuring rather than clarifying these issues. Murasaki's memory of childhood is narrated as an experience of confusion in relation to her own position in the family and to her cultural and national self. Her identity comes across as an assemblage of various factors such as, the experience of racism, the alienation from her mother who refuses to speak Japanese and only cooks Western food, and her nostalgic memories of her grandmother, who like her rebels against everything Keiko stands for. In this act of rebellion, the grandmother shares the position of the child in the family hierarchy, but is at the same time also an alternative mother figure to her granddaughter with whom she shares food and memories of her homeland.

Similar to *A Chorus of Mushrooms*, *The Joy Luck Club* is structured by a variety of narratives and narrative viewpoints that interconnect in multifarious manners. Organised in sixteen chapters the novel weaves together the voices of three mothers and four daughters, and whereas the mother and maternal is problematised mainly as absence in Goto's novel, Tan's narrative gives the mothers a direct voice in the different narratives. However, this voice comes across as a provisional one since the mothers' stories are often focused on their memories as daughters and wives, which thus presents the concept of the maternal as neither fixed nor given, but contingent on culture, national identity and history. This has also a direct effect on the

concept of the family and the manner in which it is under discussion in the novel. As Marina Heung (1996) argues:

In *The Joy Luck Club* family allegiances are complicated and disrupted within a kinship system in which blood ties are replaced by a network of alternate affiliations. ... These stories of disrupted family connections, of divided, multiplied, and of constantly realigned perceptions of kinship, constitute a pattern clearly diverging from the monolithic paradigm of the nuclear family (Heung 1996: 602).

Rather than offering a celebration of the special bond between mother and daughter, *The Joy Luck Club*, similarly to Goto's and Esquivel's imaginations of the maternal, approaches its subject in an inquisitive manner creating an atmosphere of doubt and uncertainty. Tan's novel constantly foregrounds the impossibility of 'direct' communication between the female generations, an issue that is emphasised by the way language is presented in the text. The mothers often revert to their Chinese dialects - the novel makes it quite clear that there is no such thing as one hegemonic 'Chinese' language - and most of them cannot speak English fluently. The daughters' attempt to set themselves apart from their mothers is made evident in the way they fully embrace the American way of life and in their unwillingness to learn their mother tongue. However, the misunderstandings ensuing from these different positions in relation to language and culture are not presented as something typical to first and second generation Chinese Americans but are utilised as an example for the problems that will ensue if language is perceived as a means to communicate meaning unequivocally. Stephen Souris (1994) argues that



Tan's multiple monologue novel seems to participate in the convention of having speakers speak into the void – or to the reader as audience. No actual communication between mothers and daughters occurs. ... ; the narrative makes the reader poignantly aware of the distance between each mother and daughter by showing the unbridged gap between them and the potential for sharing and communication that is only partially realized (Souris 1994: 107).

Indeed, the different narratives come across as monologues that reminisce about the past and project desires into the future, preventing a direct dialogue between mothers and daughters. The club itself was founded originally in China by Jung-Mei's mother as an opportunity for the four women to socialise by playing mah jong and entertaining each other with stories. Every week the respective hostess had to serve food,

special *dyansin* foods to bring good fortunes of all kinds – dumplings shaped like silver money ingots, long rice noodles for long life, boiled peanuts for conceiving sons, and of course, many good-luck oranges for a plentiful sweet life (Tan 1994: 23).

The relationship between food and meaning created here hints already at the main function of the culinary and alimentary in the text: by endowing the different dishes with wishes and desires for the future, eating them will transfer them inside the body and, by doing so, making them come true. However, as the fate of each of the female characters in the novel demonstrates, this imagined transference of food cannot work

as a straightforward conversion of outside into inside. On a more abstract level, this is the same for the production and dissemination of meaning and truth in the novel: they are never present as such, but always in a state of becoming with the effect that they cannot be ‘owned’ by either the mothers or the daughters. The complex link between food and meaning is implicitly referred to by Jung-Mei’s mother who ironically suggests that food can neither mean anything in a direct manner, nor can eating guarantee a straightforward transferal from outside to inside. The way we eat and what food means is always contingent on specific historic and cultural contexts, as are the bodies that consume the food:

“What fine food we treated ourselves to with our meagre allowances! We didn’t notice that the dumplings were stuffed mostly with stringy squash and that the oranges were spotted with wormy holes. We ate sparingly, not as if we didn’t have enough, but to protest how we could not eat another bite, we had already bloated ourselves from earlier in the day (Tan 1994: 23).

The meaning of food comes here into being in a metaphorical and performative way since it is not intrinsically meaningful as the contradicting descriptions of the meal demonstrate. Food and eating are part of a more complex framework and, rather than providing answers about who we are and how we relate to each other, they provoke questions about agency and phenomenological knowledge as such.

Whilst the novel’s discourse is set into and kept in motion by the desire of the mothers to make themselves ‘known’ to their daughters (and *vice versa*), this aim is

never realised, neither on a formal nor on a narrative level. The alienation between mothers and daughters is narrated through food, its preparation and consumption and in the novel, rather than functioning as a way of enhancing communication, the culinary emphasises estrangement and the impossibility of self-knowledge. Sharing food and eating together often results in conflicts and animosity and never in harmony and understanding. When Waverly takes her mother Lindo out for lunch to her favourite Chinese restaurant to tell her that she will get married to an American, Lindo dislikes the food (“Not too many good things, this menu”( Tan 1994: 166)) and complains about the restaurant’s standards of cleanliness (“This greasy thing, do you expect me to eat with it?” (Tan 1994: 166)). Of course, Waverly never even attempts to raise the subject of her marriage. When Jung-Mei remembers a particular New Year’s dinner at her mother’s house she discovers that rather than having made her *own* choice when selecting a particular crab, she had been manipulated by her mother:

“What if someone else had picked that crab?”

My mother looked at me and smiled. “Only *you* pick that crab. Nobody else take it. I already know this. Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different.”

She said it in a way as if this were proof – proof of something good. She always said things that didn’t make any sense, that sounded both good and bad at the same time (Tan 1994: 208).

Jung-Mei’s memory of her mother emphasises difference rather than sameness, and it is, paradoxically, only through difference that mother and daughter can know each other, even if this does not make sense to the daughter. There are many

examples in the novel where food is utilised as a means of highlighting estrangement and the impossibility of communication between mothers and daughters. Food and eating in *The Joy Luck Club* thus contributes to an atmosphere of ambiguity, the unfamiliar and self-doubt, which predominantly defines the relationship between mothers and daughters as well as the way cultural identity is experienced. Mothers and daughters are always in a state of in-between, and by questioning the idea of agency and self-knowledge, the novel is also distrusts the idea of the maternal as an essential, unchanging concept. With its many references to food and eating, the text encourages a re-thinking of the meaning of mother-tongue and implies that food, as well as language, complicates rather than eases communication and understanding. Furthermore, it is above all the sense of ambiguity and its inextricable link to orality, in relation to eating as well as speaking that connects questions of gender, national, cultural and ethnic identity in the novel. The atmosphere of the spectral and unfamiliar is all-encompassing and, as Ben Xu points out even ‘the return to the motherland in *The Joy Luck Club* is temporary and disillusioning, no more than a “visit”. Such a visit is at once an assertion of “going home” and a painful realization of “going home as a stranger”’ (Xu 1994: 16).

Home as a place of estrangement and alienation is also one of the major themes in *A Chorus of Mushrooms*. Food and eating in Tan’s novel whilst central to the narrative in general, is not given the same performative relevance as in Goto’s text, which is intrinsically structured by the culinary. For Naoe only Japanese food is proper food and her alienation from Western culture is above all a culinary one. Murasaki’s father has been leading a double life for years, pretending to have perfectly adapted to Canada and its way of life. However, as Murasaki finds out when

shopping at the Oriental food store, her father had been a customer there during all his time in Canada, indulging in his favourite Japanese food, salted seaweed paste. When Naoe 'runs away from home', and thus refuses to adopt the subject position allocated to her by society and culture, her daughter is not only bereft of her mother but also of her appetite and language. Her mother's departure results in a crisis of identity for Keiko since she has lost her position as a daughter which she can only regain when her own daughter agrees to mother her. When Murasaki learns to cook and feeds Keiko traditional Japanese food her mother can be coaxed back into language and into accepting that her cultural identity is marked by ambiguity. 'Eating is part of being' (Goto 1997: 138), as the owner of the Oriental food shop tells Murasaki, a message that becomes even more forceful when Murasaki discovers that her surname Tonkatsu is actually the name of a Japanese dish. *A Chorus of Mushrooms* unfolds as a type of quest narrative in which Murasaki by searching for her run-away grandmother is also searching for her own identity, in relation to gender as well as culture and ethnicity. Food, particularly in the telepathic messages from Naoe to Murasaki, is represented as directly interwoven with these questions. Furthermore, whilst the grandmother points out: 'There is a time for words, but there is a time for food also' (Goto 1996: 146) which might suggest that words and food are antagonistic to each other, more often than not food and language are represented as dialectically interlaced. Towards the end of *A Chorus of Mushrooms*, in one of her reflective monologues which implicitly address the reader, Murasaki connects the culinary directly with the discursive properties of language and narratives:

I suppose there was a time when a body could travel with only a light  
backpack and a sturdy pair of shoes. Trade a bowl of soup and a slice of bread

for a tale or two. If anybody could live that way, it would be Obāchan. Who knows, she may be doing exactly that and, even now, be putting words into my mouth. ... But there must be a lot of people out there just starving for a filling story. Something that would leave a rich flavour on their tongue, on their lips. Lick, then suck their fingertips. Let me feed you (Goto 1997: 201).

Food, as Murasaki realises at the closing pages of the novel ‘is the point of departure’ (Goto 1997: 201) and partaking of it will send her on a life-long quest that has only just begun.

Whilst displaying a range of differences in relation to structure, narrative voice and the ways food and eating are problematised, all three novels propose that there is a proximity between language and eating, the culinary and the linguistic. However, this does not suggest that eating and food function in a straightforward manner as systems of communication and understanding in general and in particular when it comes to the relationships between mothers and daughters. Rather than creating a simplistic bond between female generations in a family, food is presented as part of the complexities that govern the often unbridgeable gaps and differences between them. It is the moment of otherness and being vested in the other that is shared by food and language as systems of signification. In order to connect to the outside other, it has to be internalised by the self, which paradoxically annihilates it by way of processing it. However, the self is as instable as the other since consumption will leave its effects on the body that devours. Motherhood and the relationship between mothers and daughters refract these complex politics of otherness in the way their representation pertains to repetition and reproduction. The mother recognises her past

self in the daughter whereas for the latter imaginations of the future are often directly bound up with the maternal body, particularly in a culture where femininity and femaleness are still inextricably linked to the position of the mother. Food and eating are directly involved in producing the positions of mother and daughter, but rather than allocating spaces of subjectivity in a straightforward manner, they contribute to complications and doubt by showing that the idea of identity as a discrete entity can only ever be an illusion. Or, as Murasaki puts it at the end of *A Chorus of Mushrooms*: ‘When does one thing end and another begin? Can you separate the two?’ (Goto 1997: 213).

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